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TV Preview

This Spy's Tricks Are No Treat

PBS' Long-Winded Tale Of Ex-CIA Agent Terpil

By Patrick E. Tyler

Millions of Americans who have been assaulted over the last year by long and arduous — sometimes cryptic — accounts of former Central Intelligence Agency spies supplying and training terrorists around the world will hear some short, astonishing admissions in a very long documentary tonight.

As a quarter-hour segment on one of the network magazine shows, "Frank Terpil: Confessions of a Dangerous Man" would have been a very digestible advance to the running story of the CIA's notorious alumni agents, accused of providing the instruments of terror to some of the world's most hated dictators. In the documentary, which airs tonight at 9 on channels 26 and 32, Terpil acknowledges his merchant-of-death role, but contends he doesn't get wrapped up in emotional arguments about it.

Except for Terpil's admissions that he participated in supplying explosives, timers, night vision surveillance systems and terrorist training to Libya's dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, there is very little news of moment in the film. The admissions themselves, nevertheless, go far beyond what CBS's Mike Wallace was able to get out of Terpil in a trumpeted "60 Minutes" exclusive last fall.

As it is, however, producers David Fanning and Antony Thomas have stretched 15 minutes of usable interview material into a 1½-hour saga that features long close-ups of empty chairs, empty courtrooms, empty hotel rooms and empty-headed testimonials about the Brooklyn-born Terpil.

From his mother, Viola: "Frank would give anybody anything if he had it."

From his sister: "He had to do what he had to do . . . I'm proud of him as a brother."

From his high school chum: "In some ways he deserves a medal for what he's done."

Tonight's interviews were filmed in mid-1981 and were set up for the producers by author Jim Hougan ("Spooks"). Hougan makes a brief statement on camera that guys like Frank Terpil, trained as dirty-tricks artists by the CIA, are basically unemployable after leaving government service unless they sell their expertise on the world market to the highest bidder.

This premise, which has supported much of the public policy angst over the activities of Terpil and his one-time partner, Edwin P. Wilson, is as skewed as the documentary, which suggests that Terpil may just be one of the most dangerous men in the world and then concludes that he is a "medium-sized cog in the machinery" of international arms dealing.

Ninety minutes on the life story of a medium-sized cog?

Terpil also admits that he supplied much of the intelligence equipment — and perhaps some of the torture equipment — sought in 1977 by the now-deposed Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin. Terpil discusses his flight from Uganda at Amin's side and their arrival in Libya, where Amin insulted the Libyan soldiers Qaddafi had sent him as "women."

Terpil claims that Saudi Arabia, where Amin is now living among presumably tougher soldiers, is financing Big Daddy's eventual comeback, which is known by the code name of the "football" match. Terpil produced a taped telephone conversation between him and Amin in which the football match is mentioned with great glee.

All of the flaws on this documentary occur when the producers attempt to leave the confines of the conversation with Terpil and engage in cinematic arts and crafts. For instance, the program starts with the camera walking up and down the empty corridors of the Manhattan Sheraton where Terpil and one of his partners were arrested in December 1979 for attempting to sell 10,000 machine guns to undercover New York police detectives.

Then the film cuts to the empty Manhattan courtroom where Terpil and his pal were convicted in absentia after they skipped the country.

After some more straight talk with Terpil, the film goes on location again in Brooklyn: "It was in the company of these warm and generous people that we began to grasp the experiences that had shaped Frank Terpil." That line could have been stolen from "The Making of a President." The Brooklyn diversion, with all of its inane and superficial testimonials, is saved briefly when Viola Terpil tells about the time 15-year-old Frankie bought a machine gun from a crooked cop and sold it to the son of Terpil's high school science teacher.

"The morality of New York is my morality," Terpil announces like a bumper sticker.

The rest of the program is a hodgepodge of Terpil escapades. Perhaps the film's most serious transgression is that it fails to forthrightly state what questions are raised and what lessons there are for right-thinking Americans from the exploits of Francis E. Terpil.

Fanning and Thomas claim that no one in the CIA, FBI or Justice Department would talk to them about the case. The only conclusion viewers should draw from this statement is that the producers did a horrible job of asking. Numerous officials in several administrations publicly have provided information about Terpil's activities and the government's attempts to bring him to justice.